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Ministry of Education

OKANAGAN FALLS OPENS STRONGSTART EARLY LEARNING CENTRE

OKANAGAN FALLS – Penticton-Okanagan Valley MLA Bill Barisoff joined parents, preschoolers and school district officials today to celebrate Family Literacy Week by officially opening a new StrongStart early learning centre at Okanagan Falls elementary school.

"We know that as many as one out of every four children are beginning their first day of school not as prepared as they could be. This new program will help to ensure that kindergarten children will have more of the skills they need to succeed," Barisoff said. "This centre will create opportunities for parents and caregivers to learn about activities they can do at home to get their child hooked on learning at such an important young age."

Child and parent attendance at the Okanagan Falls StrongStart centre has almost doubled since it opened its doors earlier this month, and the school district expects the number to grow. The centre offers a free drop-in program for parents or caregivers and their children. Qualified early childhood educators will provide pre-literacy activities, including stories, music, art and puzzles to help children grow linguistically, physically and socially, and become familiar with a classroom environment.

"When I toured Okanagan Falls elementary last November, I learned that community involvement and service are very important to staff and students at this school," said Education Minister Shirley Bond. "This centre is another great way to connect Okanagan Falls families with young children to learning opportunities that will create a more literate, vibrant community."

The centre is taking advantage of empty classroom space in Okanagan Falls elementary. Schools throughout British Columbia have excess space as a result of declining enrolment. Since 2001, enrolment has declined by 42,500 students. Like the School Community Connections program that provides community access to existing unused classroom space, StrongStart centres turn the challenge of declining enrolment into an opportunity.

"This is an exciting time for our young children as they prepare to enter a world of learning and growing," said Dana Bedard, early childhood education specialist at the Okanagan Falls StrongStart centre. "The activities the youngsters will be doing at the centre will help them get comfortable in a classroom setting and give them the confidence they need to take on any challenge."

StrongStart centres are part of government's overall plan to improve literacy, and will build on the success of Ready, Set, Learn, a kindergarten readiness program. Future StrongStart centres are planned throughout B.C., fulfilling a 2005 election promise to use underutilized school spaces as centres to deliver early learning services. These centres fulfil a throne speech commitment and are part of the Ministry of Education's new mandate, which was expanded in 2005 to include early learning.

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The Province is committed to reaching its goal of making B.C. the best-educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent. Since 2001, the Province has provided more than $65 million in new literacy funding, including $15.6 million for public libraries, $4.7 million for adult literacy and $10 million for textbooks.

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Contact information for StrongStart centres can be found at:
www.bced.gov.bc.ca/literacy/early_learning/ss_centres.htm

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